

We Can't Support a Separate and Unequal System: Delivering on the Promise of Early Childhood

The opportunity gap is one of the greatest challenges to this country's economic security. It has created a pervasive achievement gap and an educational quagmire for those who have been denied equitable access to resources critical to academic success. The opportunity gap starts early and persists throughout school and beyond. Evidence from our very own HighScope Perry Preschool Study provides incontrovertible evidence about the lasting human and financial value of high-quality early childhood education experiences. These experiences have been found to prepare children for school and life by providing them with opportunities to engage in stimulating learning experiences and interactions, and to build the critical social skills they need to meet their potential in the trajectory from "cradle to career."

Early education professionals are critical to ensuring this pathway is possible and available for all children. They provide children with sensitive and responsive relationships, and language-rich and brain-building interactions. This requires that early education teachers are well educated, professionally prepared, and highly compensated. The need for well-educated and highly-competent early education professionals was underscored by the 2015 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children from Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*.

We appreciate the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), one of the oldest and most respected early childhood organizations in the country, taking leadership in strengthening our early education workforce through the Power to Profession Initiative, which establishes "a unifying framework of professional guidelines for early childhood educators" (2016). The 2015 IOM report recommends that all early childhood professionals should have a baccalaureate degree, at a minimum, among many other things. We agree with this recommendation. Thus, we implore NAEYC to revise their approach (Power to Profession, Decision Cycles 3, 4, 5) indicating that a two-year Associate's degree provides sufficient learning to qualify a teacher to lead a birth-to-age-five classroom.

Much of what we know about quality early childhood education was built on the backs of poor, minority, and marginalized children, whose learning experiences were the subject of several studies. However, national data continues to show that these young children and their families are the least likely to have access to qualified early education professionals and programs. Data indicates that over two-thirds of children are likely to experience poor-quality early childhood care, and this number significantly increases for children of color and children in poverty. The blame for the achievement does not solely reside with early childhood programs and professionals; however, if higher standards are not expected, mandated, and supported, then the early childhood system will be implicated in maintaining a **separate and unequal** system.

Every day children spend without the support of a well-educated and competent early education professional likely results in poorer outcomes and learning experiences. We value the rich diversity of the field of early education professionals and believe that higher educational standards would not deter this valued aspect of early education but, rather, strengthen it when we address inequitable access to higher education. We should not force children to continue to bear the burden of the United States' legacy of racism and discrimination. Rather, we should confront it head on by envisioning a future where all children are able to experience diverse, well-educated, and competent professionals in their classrooms.

We can't accept that zip codes determine the type of early education experiences children are likely to be exposed to. We can't accept that all children don't have the opportunity to experience a well-educated and highly competent





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professional. We can't accept that standards are consistently watered down for "those" kids. Those kids are our kids and we can't wait any longer for them to have equal access to the resources we all deserve.



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